



LYNN SCHLUETER

Knocking on North Dakota's Door **ANS Battles, Threats to Our Outdoors**

By Ron Wilson

Dead Colt Creek Reservoir is not dead.

After the discovery in 2005 that Eurasian water milfoil – an unwanted alien that crowds out native plants – was growing along much of the lake's 4.2 miles of shoreline, the Ransom County fishery remains one of southeastern North Dakota's top bass lakes.

"It's a pretty little spot that the community of Lisbon has put a lot into," said Gene Van Eeckhout, North Dakota Game and Fish Department southeast district fisheries supervisor, Jamestown. "It's a jewel along the Sheyenne River."

Whether that jewel's shine has been clouded by milfoil remains to be seen as fisheries

biologists in May had yet to determine if efforts to eradicate the exotic plant worked.

Dead Colt Creek was drawn down about 10 feet at freeze-up, leaving the fishery with about 30 feet of water. The idea was to get water off the unwelcome vegetation and freeze its roots. Unfortunately, Dead Colt Creek was hit with wet snow early last

Above: Eurasian water milfoil left high and dry along the shoreline of Dead Colt Creek Reservoir. The lake was drawn down this past fall and winter in hopes that the invasive plant would freeze out.

winter, which may have protected some of the roots from freezing. "I'm under the belief that we got below the milfoil stand with the draw down and the plants froze," said Lynn Schlueter, Department special projects biologist, Devils Lake. "But we'll have to see."

Earlier this spring, runoff that resembled chocolate milk kept Department fisheries biologists from determining the effectiveness of lowering the reservoir. "I think we'll probably see some mortality on the plants that were out of the water the longest," Van Eeckhout said. "Those that got a good hard freeze into the roots are gone ..."

The Eurasian water milfoil find at Dead Colt Creek is only the second discovery of its kind in North Dakota. Therefore, battling the exotic is still a learning experience. Schlueter said if some milfoil is found this summer, the plan could be to spot kill those plants still living. "If we find that we have plants coming up, we'll consider using a chemical that is approved for use in this type of situation," he said.

Dead Colt Creek's fish population wasn't hindered by the winter drawn down. "The reservoir was left with about 30 feet of water ... there wasn't any winterkill," Van Eeckhout said, which leaves the lake with an excellent population of largemouth bass. Department fisheries biologists monitored dissolved oxygen levels in the fishery about every two weeks last winter.

Problems arise, however, when Eurasian water milfoil gets established and out-competes native aquatic plant species. The plant grows under the water's surface, forming thick mats that make boating and fishing difficult; provides too much cover, leading to stunted fish populations and few large fish; and hinders small ducks swimming through mats. "The diversity of habitat that grows a lot of fish is lost when milfoil takes over," Schlueter said. "Once habitats are degraded, the fish community suffers and declines occur."

It gets worse, considering it takes just one piece of milfoil stem hitchhiking on fishing line, boat motor, trailer, or in a livewell, to start an infestation in another lake favored by anglers, boaters, fish and ducks. "Education remains the biggest and best defense," Schlueter said. "There's nothing terribly involved about cleaning your fishing gear, boats, duck decoys, waders ... to get rid of aquatic nuisance species that hitchhike on gear. We'll stay ahead of the spread or introduction of exotics in North Dakota if people take the time to do what's right."

Boat Ride Away

While the state remains relatively free of aquatic nuisance species, there are a handful that are only a boat ride away, biologists say, considering how mobile anglers, hunters and other recreationists are nowadays. It's certainly not a stretch, for example, to say the same anglers who fish the zebra-mussel-infested Mille Lacs lake in Minnesota for walleye or the Great Lakes for salmon, may also ply the Missouri River in North Dakota for recreation.

"The poster child for aquatic nuisance species, of course, is the zebra mussel," said Greg Power, Department fisheries division chief. "Zebra mussels are a threat and a concern."

How the mussels would fare – whether they would thrive or fold – when faced with North Dakota's climate and differing water quality is only a guess, but it's something Power doesn't want to find out. "We can't say they'd be the end to all of our fisheries, but we don't want to know that," he said.

Scientists have discovered zebra mussels in the Missouri River well downstream of Bismarck at Gavin's Point Dam near Yankton, South Dakota. They're also found in Minnesota, and this summer biologists in Montana will be trying to find out if zebra mussels exist in Fort Peck Reservoir.

Fort Peck is part of the Missouri River System and Schlueter says if zebra mussels have been introduced there, the young mussels will drift downstream until they find firm substrate and start new colonies. "And what's downstream of Fort Peck?" Schlueter asks. "We are."

Zebra mussels multiply quickly and form huge, dense colonies; and strip the water column of zooplankton, phytoplankton and other food items small fish and other animals need to survive. "Less food means fewer fish," Schlueter said. "Even stocking large numbers of game fish cannot overcome the lack of food."

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Zebra mussels in Lake Sakakawea would compete, for example, with the big reservoir's coveted paddlefish, which survive by filtering miniscule foods from the water. Silver carp and bighead carp, which have spread up the Missouri River to Gavin's Point Dam as well as into the lower James, Vermillion and Big Sioux rivers, would also change the balance of things as these fish also feed on zooplankton and phytoplankton. "They get to huge numbers quickly and would outstrip paddlefish," Schlueter said.

It turns out, there are many exotic plants and animals out there that could alter North Dakota's native habitats and occupants. "I can find you a new threat everyday," Schlueter said.

While new threats exist, state wildlife biologists have had some experience at battling the unwanted. Common carp, for example, have long been an unwelcome irritant. These fish have compromised the fishing, among other things, on waters because of their penchant to muck things up, hindering vegetation from growing, which provides spawning cover for some game fish species. "The reality is that we've had to deal with undesirable species in the state for 50 years ... and we've made some progress," Power said.

Biologists would like to pick their battles, however, and not deal with those exotic species that are simply a boat ride away from North Dakota. "We need people to care, to understand the threat of bringing unwanted hitchhikers into the state," Schlueter said. "We don't want our legacy to those who follow us to be that we didn't care."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.

Eurasian water milfoil looks harmless enough, but the exotic plant can out-compete native plants.



CRAIG BIHRLE



CRAIG BIHRLE

Curly leaf pondweed can grow thick mats and make boating and other water activities difficult.

Minutes of Prevention

We don't want to be known as the generation that didn't care. So, let's do our part in preventing the spread or introduction of aquatic nuisance species in North Dakota. The following guidelines help keep ANS from hitchhiking to our waters:

- Inspect your boat or personal watercraft, trailer, fishing or scuba gear, and remove all plants, plant fragments and mud before leaving the lake.
- Drain water from the boat motor, livewell, bilge, and behind the transom before leaving the lake.
- Powerwash your boat, motor or PWC, and trailer with water 110 degrees Fahrenheit or hotter.
- Disinfect livewell and bilge with a bleach solution (one part chlorine to 20 parts hot water). Wash using water 110 degrees Fahrenheit or hotter.
- Disinfect fishing, hunting, scuba or other gear with the aforementioned bleach solution and hot water. Allow equipment to air dry thoroughly.
- Don't dump bait, or the water in which the bait was transported, into the lake.
- Place excess bait in fish grinder, garbage, or bury at home.
- Return fish into the lake from which they came.
- Do not transplant fish to other lakes, it's illegal.
- Do not release pets or aquatic garden plants into the wild. Dispose of unwanted pets or aquatic plants to proper facilities.

It takes just minutes to prevent ANS problems. For more information, contact the nearest North Dakota Game and Fish office, or visit the Department website at gf.nd.gov.